

[Fly Backwards]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Partnow

ADDRESS 557 West 144th Street

DATE July 6, 1939

SUBJECT Maritime Folklore - THEY FLY BACKWARDS TO KEEP THE DIRT OUT OF THEIR EYES.

1. Date and time of interview June 29, 1939
2. Place of interview Federal Art Project 110 King Street New York City
3. Name and address of informant

John Beach

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. Clarence Weinstock 44 Morton Street New York City

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Clarence Weinstock 44 Morton Street - New York City

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C

TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED)

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SUBJECT Maritime Folklore - THEY FLY BACKWARD TO KEEP THE DIRT OUT OF THEIR EYES.

This was the English ship layin over in Brooklyn near Robbins Drydock. I was wanderong on board the ship. It was a punky-lookin job. The officer wanted a lot of yessin but I got it. We pulled out with a load of ten cent good and curios. They flash these things around in the Congo. We picked up these kernel nuts there that they stick into Palm olive soap. Two or three days out the bully comes over. I wanta buy your bunk. I'll give ya six pounds. The bully bought 10 bunks. We didn't know why then but we found out later. We had to sleep on deck. Well, we galloped into the Congo and transferred the cargo to a monitor covered with steel neeting for protection against snakes hangin on the trees in the jungle, and the

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mosquitoes. These mosquitoes were big as butterflies and they used to fly backward to keep the dirt out of their eyes.

Up the Congo River we stopped at a little native village and we got a new pilot. A river pilot, along with a white overseer, the screwiest lookin bird, looked like he couldn't sign his name to a check. He was wearing spats, the top part of a swim suit and a walking cane but he knew those jungle rivers all right. We got up 600 miles when he sees a branch river which ends in a 2 wood. Take a chance, he says, it might be a short cut through the Congo, save a day's run. But this river was no river, it was just a flood in the jungle. Well, we went up and the water receded as soon as we got in and there we were with out boat in the middle of a river bottom, high and dry. Right off a lot of little dugouts and canoes came up with little men the size of peanuts. Women too maybe, you couldn't tell, they were so small. They were letting go of these poisoned dogs and we were risking possible death from a chance poisoned spear. They got over to our grating and tore it open and they swarmed in and dragged off our cargo. I remember thousands of them lugging one of our tractors. In a while the river filled up again, it comes out of the jungle steam, mother nature breathes up and down and things happen, you see.

Well, we went off again and in one jumping off town we began to unload a feller, some white overseer, he was educated at Cambridge, wearing a bathrobe and a business suit. He came out - like a sarang, they call them in India. He said, "If any of you sailor boys come ashore take care of the women folk in the hope that England may have some children." What happens? After them children were four years old they were sent to the island of Sea Englore. And when they were fourteen years old, the government hoped to conquer the jungle with a lot of these soldiers. Well, it was a mixed crew and they all dashed out after those women while the native guys sniped at them with blowtorches. The forgot about the cargo. I was like a sightseer for the mating of these future generations.

The village had a lot of match shacks and the natives, they didn't wear Pond's cream even to keep the mosquitoes off them. There were two hundred species of bananas growing

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theres, some of them two feet long. Most of the sailors got dysentery. When we got back to New York, Hoffman's Island used to be a quarantine, four of the fellers died on the way 3 back. There's a rule of the road, the maritime code, to stop a ship and dump the body at twelve o'clock midnight but what's a sailor? A few extra chains to weigh him down, and he's dropped over the side and that's all.

I remember I asked the doctor at the Island, why doesn't anything ever happen to me? He said; "You travel too fast, that's why. In a year you can be in the West Indies, the Persian Gulf and Australia and you're in New York two months and you beat it out. If you're sick you can trace it to rotten food, that's all." And we had it. Some weak tea and a can of jelly made out of turnips or something.

Well, that bully I was telling you about - while the crew was attending to their matrimonial parts he was buying stuff and storing it in these bunks, see, that he bought from us.

My mother had been telling me about the beautiful women in Persia and Arabia and when I got past the age of three I decided I'd some day go to the Orient. I went to South Street, and I asked some Holland boys I had befriended these boys, so they showed me to the captain of a vessel. He said: Want a job? I said: Yeah, bring it up and let me take a look at it. That's how it was in those days, plenty of jobs. Well, he was taking some oil pipe and gear for the Standard Oil company, they were going to the Sahr of Persia to break into the rich oil fields there. So we beat it across the North Atlantic and there was a lousy speed-up those days, the pipes weren't stored right in the hold - we went so fast we shook them pipes off the ship. We galloped over to Cannes and Nice, I don't mean a can, and we rounded up the crew and turned into Port Said.

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Those Arabs came down to the boat, they got fifty uncles and aunts a piece and none of them want to leave until he gets something, even if it's the paint off the sides of the ship.

Well, we galloped through the Red Sea and - wait, we picked up a French actress, she was going to walk nude through to Tibet, she heard about the llamas there but she had fifteen trunks of clothing and she used to give her underwear to the sailors to wash and they used to walk around in it on deck. She was going to walk through the jungle and the desert, nude, just for a lark or something, I don't know, we picked her up at Marseilles and then dumped her trunks and never heard of her again.

So we gallop to the Persian Gulf and, you see, it's like a racer, they shoot the gun and he's so excited the other guy'll be there before him, in Persian you gotta run and make the river before that pile of sand at the head of the Euphrates stops your ship and the river is so full of goddam sponges near Burshire on the Persian side and - first the water snakes. At Burshire a man of war sloop drew alongside and some screwy lookin' guy give us health instructions, he was almost faded away himself, that was because he had no potatoes for two years. "Don't touch water," he says, "or whiskey or you'll drop dead. Drink beer." Funny thing, in India them health inspectors tell ya to drink whiskey. That was the German angle. We found out later that whole highway between Mongol and Bagdad was full of German beer bottles, they marked the highways with German beer bottles. That Euphrates, it's a funny thing, the pilot takes you up to three feet of the bank and then you're pulled back into the middle of the stream, that tide's so fast. They got dug-out canoes there with poles, you walk along the edge of the bank, with the date trees on a beautiful night, boy! We took up a crew of longshoremen who went into the coal bunkers and lived there, they attended to their duties in the coal and boy, did that stink, they all brought their prayer mats with 'em and a little bundle of curry and rice. Those fellers - why, they always pick out the feller with most syphilis, pimples, can't even work on deck and they make him cook. Dirt! The natives used to pack dates with their feet. A beautiful sight, date trees, when you go a quarter mile into that desert, and if there's a moon and

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them jackals are crying. No part of the world, though, remember this, is anybody wild. You can take the Staten Island Ferry to the Island and you act the same in the Congo, and nothing happens to you either.

Well, we were laying ahsore and I wanted to go up to see Bagdad but I didn't have no dough. So I got out my bath towel and a pair of shorts and I tried gettin out under the sun. The captain had bought some German beer and with tow or three bottles — What a glorious, beautiful wonderful drunk you can get. Well, I went over to an Arab dentist and he went to work on me with a drill like they use for subways and a carpenter's mallet. He had a gadget there for pulling teeth, it needed two hundred slaves with pulleys and a whole complicated system of block and tackle that was strung way outside the office to the desert, and these two hundred men, they pulled and hauled this whole system of pulleys until the pressure was minimized down to the screwy thing that pulled your tooth. Well, I got the money all right, the bill for that labor there was two rupees but I told the dentist to sign 15 rupees and I split with the captain and he gave me enough to get to Bagdad. But that dentist there he stuck cement instead a plaster into my tooth and my face swelled up so much I had to go the British Military Hospital. Them captains are good that way, if ya fight for chow they'll put ya in irons but if ya're drunk or in a spot they'll give ya the shirt off their backs, it's the code of the sea.

Well, on the road I men another guy who was startin out for Bagdad, 6 there was one Ford left in town and he had it. That Ford was the first airoplane made out of a car and when you raced out in that car people just faded away on both sides. Those roads were put down with date trees and German beer bottles. On the way we fell out or dropped out, all I know, that Ford just wasn't under us there. One day, we found ourselves, this buddy and me, on a railroad built by Germans over to India. Imagine that, them Germans were sneaking a railroad in the middle of the desert. Well, we got to the outskirts and climbed into a sugar car and went back home. But, first, when we got to those box cars we were just ready to get in when somebody yelled. I saw this bayonet. And I yelled: Americano. He was a punjab or somethin, he didn't shoot. In Portugal once, I said Americano and the

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other guy said: Mericano, my ass and he swung his rifle down and almost split me in two pieces. But in Persia they got em trained like seals. Well, we never got to Bagdad.

You don't keep time in that part of the world. Maybe it was the same day, maybe a week later, I'm lookin out at the horizon, and I see a fire in the desert. This Arab says there's nothing there, nothin around to burn anyway. Then up comes a big hand on that horizon. Them Jews when they said a hand rose, they knew what they were talkin about, it was the beginnin of a sandstorm and boy, it rose and crept up forty or fifty miles away. It was three o'clock and by five we took our bread and all the tin cans and wrapped handkerchiefs around our eyes and buried it. You talk about thrills. There was yellow all round our eyes and sand. And wind. Why, when we unpacked the cans, why in the middle of those cans there was sand. I've spoken to the explorer's club and Lief Ericson, you know, Byrd, the rest, they say the same thing.

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Well, in that hospital I was tellin ya, it was the darkest and romantic lookin place in the world, I was in the lobby there or the lounge, I said to a man there: What you doin here? That man was Lawrence, T.E. Lawrence I was talkin to. He said: My job is political officer on the Firefly out there. We beat it up the river and when we find a village we fire two guns and if any of them shieks don't care to come aboard and cough up with some dough, we just blow the whole village to hell. You know, those villages are a bunch of tents. They dig big blocks of clay out of the river and fuss around and there's a village. I was surprised. Why? I said. Well, he says, sometimes fifty fellers come aboard, they're spoutin all kinds of dialects and our interpreter tries fifty kinds of dialect on them, you know, so many tribes, you can't tell if they're Yankees or Giants. When he hits the right one, he says: The Great White Mother is protecting you. What you fellers got? The chief says We're broke. He says: What? With all them bold belts there, this pot here, that gold pan? Come on, bring it aboard. Then they pile on it and beat it up the river again.

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Well, we got aboard again, I was tellin ya I was in Persia, and we cracked into the stern of a ship and got into a whirlpool and so forth but we were going to the Sheik or Maharajah. This boy gets up six o'clock in the morning and he never even gets out and prays but thenatives there bring him presents of mules and jackasses and that puss of his, he never cracks a smile even. He must be a union man. Well, right behind him are two buildings. This Sheik lives in the little outhouse and his hah-reem lives in this palace. Now on top of this palace is a row of little windows around the top [?] floor and I was determined, after what my mother told me how willowy these 8 Arabian women were, I wanted to get in and see this hah-reem. So we got liquored up and my buddy, Shorty, his name was, climbs up to the window ledge, he shinnies up a kind of rain spout and he's hangin inside by the ledge, all I see is his mitts hangin there. He says to me Slim, it's dark in here. There's no floor. He sounds like a murder mystery. He says: Come on. But I'm hangin back. Then I see Shorty's hands disappear and I hear him go plop on them cushions the hah-reem reclines and a long yell, then a lotta yellin, Shorty, I guess, woke up the whole goddam hah-reem and that's the last I ever heard of Shorty, I never found him around anywheres.

Well, England gave that Sheik there a navy and he used to fire a gun every day five o'clock at night. It was a coupla mud scows, a floatin bath tub and 3 or 4 gas boats. You coulda got the whole thing at Robbins Drydock for 500 dollars.

This sheik was going to marry the Shar of Persia's daughter and I saw the Shar, he was the caricature of an Oriental, fat face with a funny little white hat on. That was some wedding procession there on the river. All the people got into these black dug out canoes, the men in the first canoe and the sheik sat in the rear, the women were in the back beating tom-toms and the men were blowin on shrill whistles. One thing about those Arabs, they wait for the current and then drift down, as far as the current goes, they never try to row against the current, then at ebb-tide or whatever you call it, the current turns and they go back the other way. That was some wedding. It was an excursion, some Albany night boat or somethin, an outing.....

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I had a lotta brains. If any of the sailors got into a tough corner, I'd have to jump in, I was the only brains workin in those crews.

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One time I was in Rome when Mussolini marched on the town. I was just out of jail in some town, I forget, and they wanted to get me out, so they offered me three trips. I took the one to Rome. I got stewed and got on the third class train. In Italy the third class is local, it drags along down. In Pisa, I remember, that train waited for three artists to get their easels out of the way. Well, a bunch of fellers with black shirts and fezzes on their heads got on. Jesus, talk about your Robin Hood gangs. They had pitchforks tied to their guns, and old swords and pickaxes, anything. They were all carrying big wooden boxes and I asked one of them what was in it. I figured it was bombs or something. He opened it; inside was same half starved bologny and a bottle of wine. This one had been in America and he showed me a postcard. See this? he said. Brookalyna Bridge. I asked: What are ya? Adult boy scouts? He says: If any of these comrades here [?] asks for a seat in the name of the King give it to em or you'll never see Genoa again. Well, we get into Rome and a lot of carabinieri charge up to the train and herd us all into the waiting room. They're tearing up dresses and rippin and shootin and going to work seriously. So I uses my head and crawls into a toilet. I didn't give myself time to fish out a nickel, I just crawled in underneath. I musta been there five hours. When I got out five o'clock in the morning there were carabinieri all over the place, standing at every door. I'm tellin ya, those were some days, if ya sat in a restaurant and a waiter got you your drinks he'd go out and do a little shooting and then came back again.

Well, I went to the American consul in Rome to get him to get me out. There was a typical tourist up there about fifty years old, he was disgusted [ad] the old lady he was with was disgusted too, I 10 can't get into the museum he was sayin, I come three thousand miles and they won't let me in. So the consul says: But, sir, it's four o'clock and in Italy, it's a custom to close down. I don't care, says the monkey, I blah blah blah. And that consul

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listens to that butter and egg man but when it comes to me. Listen, I says to the consul, you listen to this monkey. Come across with some liras, willya? But, says he, that's Mr and Mrs Horse Manure from Baltimore. Aah.

Later, on board the ship, there were forty new cops, green police, they call them, beautiful green capes with a Genoese emblem on top. They were after me. I hid away and tried to get the bullets out of the gun and I did, all except one, that one stuck, but I threw the rest of the bullets into the toilet. What I should of done was throw he gun overboard but I didn't think of it then. Well, I was in jail all day Sunday, then they released me providing I go back on the ship.

I was in jail in Norfolk once when a guy comes in in the middle of the night and says he wanted a farmer. That's what I thought. What he meant was a fireman. But I didn't know it until I end up in Newport News on an old tub rigged out with oil-burning lamps and back-aft they had a big icebox and the only electricity aboard was a tiny dynamo for the radio room. It was a Greek ship flyin a British flag and shippin American grain to some Dutch port, Antwert, I think. A real International mix-up.

Well, I says to the boys when we're out at sea: Boys, when I was in jail in Norfolk I had a dream. I dreamt I was gonna be on a ship that was gonna sink in the middle of the ocean. I don't believe in dreams, I didn't believe in it myself, but it's a fact, I dreamt that.

We're out about two days when - Radio operators won't ever tell 11 a sailor, ya know, but one day he says to me: I think we're on our way in, boy. I was dumpin ashes then and this radio man says: We're in for a blow. We started to get back to New York but the first radiogram, see, said make for port, there's a gale a hundred miles an hour comin along. A gale's rarely that much, I think it's about fifty or sixty miles generally, but these hurricanes came up from Jamaica, Nassau or Salvador or some place and come up to the ocean past Norfolk like the Gulf Stream, the same road, so we're in line with New York outside Sandy

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Hook when we get a second cable tellin us to start out across the Atlantic and it's blowin like hell already.

Imagine, Wooden decks on the goddam tub, a focale -. Why, you wash yerself with a bucket, the same as you pee in.

Well, we're out three four days when the tail end of that hurricane hit us. The sailors were lashing things down and by ten o'clock we were just like a cork on the ocean, just picked up and slammed down. The coal in the bunker shifted. There were three passengers aboard and the captain got them to shovel coal with the rest. But I didn't feel like it. The old man, the skipper comes over with a gun and says sort of kindly: Son, you shovel or I'll have to blow your brains out, son. So I threw my shoes off the side you can't shovel in your naked feet. But those sons of bitches wrapped burlap bags around my feet and I started shiftin cargo.

Well, all four lifeboats went. Ever see them davits, they're that thick, they were just loosened out like pins. The smokestacks stayed, I don't know who. There was some oil tanker pumpin out oil nearby. The average sailor thinks oil calms the ocean but it only calms them ripples on the waves, but the waves are just the same. That navy tanker [?] there went down. First there was one part of its smokestack, then there 12 was nothin but oil over the whole ocean. It was the Arethusa, you can check up if you want to. Twenty one ships went down that night. There was the moon lookin down at us. It's the first time I ever saw the moon with a real face.

That tremendous icebox there, we lashed it with steel cables but the sea broke it loose and even took the donkey winches off too. Those guys out in Africa must of fed off corned beef washed up from that icebox two years later.

Well, I opened up the galley and the water poured out. There was a big pan they used to make bread in, a silver tray, it was all battered in, all the steel pots were hammered into pulp. I took a drink of water and when I pumped up the water it was full of salt. Then I went

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down into the engine room. The engineers down there were workin with a little tiny drill and they were trying to put a hole through the bulkhead, there was sweat on their faces. Then the ventilators on the port side broke away and this whole load of grain and special boxes of lumber. The ocean water had gone down into the grain and they told us if we didn't get that water out, each of them grains would get swollen bigger and bigger and the load of swollen grain would bust the ship open and these engineers were borin a hole through this bulkhead with this midget drill to let the water out. The water was already filling the bilges and the stink was enough to kill ya. At the same time the water was risin and the water in the fire room put the fire out and when the water hit those hot ashes it made a smoke and gas enough to kill ya.

I was hungry. We hand't anything from the day before and I came down to the storeroom. Well, when I opened that door everything came out like brown tomato catsup and the porthole glass was broken. The 13 only thing there was Australian rabbit in a can and some flour that was wet. We went and shovelled that flour up and got a pile of newspapers and made a fire and tried to dry up that flour, which was salty, nd we mixed that Australian rabbit and the dough. Listen, it was like garbage but I ate it like everybody else.

During the night an Italian passenger ship came alongside and radioed: Abandon ship, we'll take crew. It was lovely to see the lights of that ship there but how could you get to it, it was impossible. We were listing, and I was walking at an angle. Well, one guy had been an Irish Republican Rebel, be had killed his mother and three aunts, he was an arsonist, a rapist, a whatnot. He asks me: Are you scared, Slim? Jesus Christ, I say, no. He yells: What you use his name at a time like this? And he backs me up and hauls off with a haymaker.

Pretty soon the captain orders all hands in midship. We knew it was the end. Like when the chaplain comes to pray for you in prison, you know it's the last mile. I was thinkin, Jeez my mother don't know where I am. It's a hell of a thing to meet death without anybody knowing about it, nobody to say good luck to you, you sonofabitch.

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The seas were like mountains, half as high as the Rockies. Water was pourin over the vocsle head and I was standing underneath. It was like being on the bottom of the ocean and yet breathin.

We passed a three masted schooner. I was the only man who was [?] ever on a sailing ship. She had only one jib up, no, a reefed mainsail. I said to the captain I'd be willin to go out and row over and help someone on that boat. Here was I facin death and I was worried about those screwy monkeys on that tub in the trough of the ocean. I claim those men were lashed to the heaving line and I should of gone out and saved. But I didn't.

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Then out of the blue sky along come a ship and threw us a cable overboard but we threw it right back and then we got to the Azores.

I had a Bull Durham bag of foreign coins that I'd been picking up in different parts of the world. When the captain wouldn't let me off the ship I got up on the anchor chain and jingled the bag. In a minute every native in port came rushing up and took me off the boat.

I was put in the calaboose. It was like heaven. All day the prostitutes used to come in with these oranges and these scruffy lemons and cigarettes and corn meal bread and jugs of milk. Those native prostitutes came down to be examined and they brought all this stuff along. Whenever I wake up in a foreign port now I look up and see if there's bars on the windows. It was heaven.

Of course they used to teach me the dirty words first. And the cheif of police he was Portugee, he used to say: Sailors are put in my calaboose because the skippers frame them.

Boy, what a country, those Azores.